

The University of Chicago

ALDOUS HUXLEY: THE DEFEAT
OF YOUTH

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AND LITERATURE
JUNE 1943

By
HERMANN CLAY BOWERSOX

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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CHAPTER I

THE EARLY POEMS

Arduous search for one who is chained by his desires to dead carcasses, whose eyes are dimmed with tears by the slow heart-breaking twilights full of old family ghosts laid in lavender, whose despair cries out for opiate and anodyne, craving gross sleep or a place on the airy unsupported pinnacles which hang in the sterile upper chambers of ether.

--Aldous Huxley

1

The first works of Aldous Huxley to receive other than serial publication were poetry. The Burning Wheel, a collection of thirty-one lyrics, was published in 1916, when Huxley was twenty-two years old. The Defeat of Youth, containing thirty-six poems, came out in 1918, and Leda, containing twenty-six, in 1920. Some of these poems and a few others also appeared in Jonah, a pamphlet privately issued in 1917; in the second to sixth "cycles" of Wheels (1917-21), an anthology of contemporary verse sponsored by Edith Sitwell; and elsewhere. After Leda, Huxley deserted poetry for prose, reprinting a selection of his early verse in 1925, but publishing no new volumes of poetry until 1929.

These early poems merit separate discussion, not merely because they are poetry as opposed to prose, but because they are a kind of microcosm in which one may observe all of Huxley's fundamental problems and the various methods he devises to solve or evade those problems. Huxley's emotional and intellectual development after 1920 is merely the successive (and partly simultaneous) exploration of attitudes that have been in his consciousness almost from the very beginning of his literary career. This is not to say that the pattern of Huxley's development from The Burning Wheel to Leda corresponds to the pattern of his development from Crome Yellow (1921) to Grey Eminence (1941). Indeed, whatever change is evident in Huxley's attitude between 1916 and 1920 is almost the reverse of the change that one may observe in Huxley

after 1920. What one finds in the early poems is not an epitome of Huxley's successive alterations but a statement of all the various points of view that he is to explore in his later works. In the interest of clarity and pattern, however, one may ignore the chronology of the early poems and impose upon them a pattern that corresponds to that of Huxley's development after 1920. The accomplishment of such a task is the purpose of this first chapter.

Huxley's early poems reveal him as one who was deeply concerned with the old problem of the disparity between what is and what should be. He looked about him and discovered a world of which he could not approve: a cosmos that seems indifferent, if not actually hostile, to man's conceptions of value; a society that, however much it talks about moral principles, constantly repudiates them in practice. He looked within the human microcosm and discovered analogous dichotomies. Everywhere he found division, everywhere disparity between fact and value.

This separation of the real and the ideal was, for Huxley, an intensely painful phenomenon. His chief intellectual and emotional problem, then, was that of reconciling these opposites, or of escaping (so far as that is possible) from the brute world of fact to an ideal world of value. Reconciliation and escape, it should be noted, were not sharply distinguished in Huxley's mind. What he was seeking was some kind of unity--a view of the human and non-human universe that resolves or appears to resolve its various conflicts and contradictions. Ideally, such a resolution would involve no sacrifice of truth; but its seeming preservation might satisfy Huxley, provided that conflict had been eliminated.

This, in brief, has been Huxley's problem, and it constitutes, in some form or other, the subject matter of almost everything that he has written. Let us examine it in the context of the early poems.

The cosmos, says Huxley in a number of poems, is a kind of celestial madhouse. It is a zoo where an Ideal Monkey displays on his buttocks the splendours of the Azure, where a Negress suckles a troop of elephants, where Behemoth walks the golden shore, and where the giant Roc

lays, from time to time, on the lap of Nothing
Some new, complete universes, each one decorated
With a little Omnipotent who believes himself infinite.¹

¹"Zoo Celeste," Wheels, a Third Cycle, ed. Edith Sitwell

It is a huge merry-go-round whose motion is exhilarating until one notices the "slobbering cretin" turning the wheel and grinding out the celestial music.² If there is an Intelligence in such a cosmos, it is malevolent: God is a cruel topiarist, torturing men's bodies into fantastic shapes;³ at best, He is indifferent to our sufferings:

God's in His Heaven: He never issues
 (Wise Man!) to visit this world of ours.
 Unchecked the cancer gnaws our tissues,
 Stops to lick chops and then again devours.⁴

If God is a slobbering cretin, then the universe is irrational; if He is a malevolent topiarist, it is evil; if the gods are Monkey, Negress, Behemoth, and Roc, it is insane and hideous. There is nothing in the cosmos to correspond to human conceptions of value; and without Reason, Goodness, and Beauty in the universe, there is no meaning or purpose in events. Things merely happen: the world functions in accordance with physical laws that operate mechanically. The celestial bodies move in their orbits; the seasons come and go; men are born, suffer pain, and die--all to no purpose whatever. Such was Huxley's reading of the cosmos in the early poems.

What of the human world--the world of social relations and the psychological world of the individual man? Huxley's answer was that it is the counterpart of the mad cosmos outside man. Human existence, he says in poem after poem, is chiefly vanity and vexation, relieved now and then by temporary escapes into sleep or happy love or art.⁵ Huxley assigned no explicit reasons for the pain of human existence: it is the fact rather than the cause which interested him; but his constant implication in the early poems is that life is painful because man, like God, is stupid and cruel and ugly.

(Oxford, 1918), p. 19. This is a literal translation from Huxley's original, which is in French.

²"Merry-Go-Round," Leda (New York, [1920]), p. 40.

³"Topiary," The Defeat of Youth and Other Poems (Oxford, 1918), p. 38.

⁴"Ninth Philosopher's Song," Leda, p. 34.

⁵For "escape" poems, see "Books and Thoughts," "Contrary to Nature and Aristotle," "Escape," The Burning Wheel (Oxford, 1916), pp. 26, 27, 28.

It is not easy to illustrate this thesis by brief quotation, for Huxley's disillusioned pessimism is to be observed rather in the mood than in the subject matter of his verse. Perhaps "Soles Occidere et Redire Possunt," written to commemorate the brief life of John Ridley, a friend of the poet, will serve as well as any one poem to exemplify Huxley's feeling about the futility of existence and the ineluctable loneliness of a sensitive soul in a brutal universe.⁶ John Ridley, lying late in bed, dreams of entering a palace on a Mediterranean bay and hearing behind a closed door a lutanist playing "feminine music"--music, he thinks upon awakening, that might have revealed

the all

Unseizable confidence, the mystic Rose.

Mingled with this notion are thoughts of shaving, the memory (apparently) of a disgusting sexual experience, and (when he disrobes for his bath and notices a scar from a wound sustained in the war) a reflection that this is

One of God's jokes, typically good. . . .

At the breakfast table he scans the Times and finds it dull. Looking over the personal column prompts the lugubrious question: "Why is it nobody ever talks to me?" The morning mail brings a letter from Helen, and he wonders whether there is any escape from love, meanwhile regretting his separation from Helen, and the shortness of time we have to master "love's science and art." Love, it appears from a letter he writes to Helen and from some of his poetry, constitutes one of his highest values. When young, he says, he sought intellectual truth; now

I choose more plastic beauties, but inspire
Life in their clay, purity in their dung
With the creative breath of my desire.

⁶Huxley's introduction to this poem (Leda, pp. 55-56) suggests a kind of detachment from the subject matter. Huxley speaks of John Ridley as an adolescent suffering from "that instability of mind 'produced by the mental conflict forced upon man by his sensitiveness to herd suggestion on the one hand and to experience on the other' that characteristic instability which makes adolescence so feebly sceptical, so inefficient, so profoundly unhappy." (Huxley's reference is to William Trotter, Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War [New York, 1917], p. 58.) But all that Huxley says about John Ridley applies with equal force to himself. The ideas and feelings of John Ridley are to be met again and again in The Burning Wheel, The Defeat of Youth, Leda, Crome Yellow, Mortal Coils--to take the more obvious examples.

Having become a "votary of the copulative cult," he has found "utter truth" in sex. Later in the day, after a dull and distressing luncheon with Auntie Lou, who is full of cant and prejudice and misinformation, he makes his way, sunk in the deepest melancholy, to Oxford Street, where, "in a sudden fearful vision" he sees

The whole world spread before him--a vast sphere
Of seething atoms moving to one law:
"Be individual. Approach, draw near,
Yes, even touch: but never join, never be
Other than your own selves eternally."

He flees from this vision of human loneliness into a cafe, where he observes only

visions of mortality,
Memento Mores from the pink alcove,
Nightmare oppressiveness of profane love.
Cesspool within, and without him he could see
Nothing but mounds of flesh and harlotry.
.....
It was the nightmare of a corpse. Dead, dead...
Oh, to wake up, to live again! he fled
From that foul place and from himself.

He takes refuge in Leicester Square and is consoled for the moment by its beauty, which is

so finely unaware
Of syphilis and the restless in and out
Of public lavatories.

Thinking and action, he decides as he rests in the square, are folly; wisdom consists in culling "the flowers of the five senses." Nevertheless, he feels the need for action, since he is about to return to active service in the war; and this need he satisfies by the performance of various actions which he knows are meaningless. This brings him to a realization of his own insignificance in the world of affairs:

Misery to have no chin,
Nothing but brains and sex and taste:
Only ommissively to sin,
Weakly kind and cowardly chaste.

He decides to become "Incarnate Chin" and "eat the black sweat of niggers and flagellate them with whips." But this mood passes swiftly. He then achieves a momentary peace in beholding the beauty of St. Martin's spire; but this sight reminds him of the transience of life, and so he flees to a movie, where he gains a longer respite from "the pain of being young" by falling asleep. That evening he entertains Jenny, "beautiful as a poplar," in a cafe, talking about himself and life with an air of ancient wisdom

(he is older than the rocks on which he sits), and complimenting Jenny, wondering all the while whether he really means what he says. Later, as he hands Jenny into her cab he experiences a sense of

Freedom and widening space; his life expands,
Ready, it seems, to burst the iron bands
Of self, to fuse with other lives and be
Not one but the world, no longer "I" but "She."

But this happy mood is transient. An aged hansom cab, like the memory of past happiness, bears Jenny away; and suddenly he wonders whether his evening experiences have been real. The old cab horse jogs

On ghostly hoofs back to safe Has-Been:--
But fact returns insistent as remorse.

And so the futile and painful day comes to an end.⁷

"Soles occidere et redire possunt": suns can set and rise again, but for man the dark night of the soul is everlasting. So life seems to the adolescent, who is

all an upward agony
Of undefined desires.⁸

The satisfaction he seeks is no more than "a fantastic dream without a name";⁹ his complaint against life is not more clearly defined either. But his dissatisfaction seems, in general, to arise from his inability to harmonize the ideal and the sordid aspects of human existence, or to separate the two and live solely on the plane of the ideal. Intelligent and sensitive, he is offended by stupidity and grossness; a lover of beauty, he is saddened by ugliness and by the swift passing of beauty; a votary of the copulative cult, he is horrified by flesh and harlotry. The ideal is always slipping from his grasp and falling into the mean and sordid.

One aspect of this conflict between the ideal and the real deserves special mention--the problem of sex. There is, on the one hand, something called love--not Platonic affection, of course, but a passion that springs from the soil of our animal nature to bloom on the highest level of our being. And then there is lust, "Love's rebel servant," who

⁷Leda, pp. 55-80.

⁸"The Poplars," The Defeat of Youth, p. 16.

⁹"Soles Occidere et Redire Possunt," Leda, p. 69.

delights to beat
 The maddening quick dry rhythms of goatish feet
 Even in the sanctuary, and makes bold
 To mime himself the godhead of the place.¹⁰

The sonnet sequence that provides the title for The Defeat of Youth is Huxley's most extended account in the early poems of the conflict between love and lust. It tells of a youthful poet who is happy and exalted in his love, confident that

the soul is wrought
 Of one stuff with the body--matter and mind
 Woven together in so close a mesh
 That flowers may blossom into a song, that flesh
 May strangely teach the loveliest holiest things
 To watching spirits. Truth is brought to birth
 Not in some vacant heaven: its beauty springs
 From the dear bosom of the material earth.

Then, the poem goes on to say, he makes the horrifying discovery that his integration is not so perfect as he thought, that his love is only the smiling mask to hide the leering face of lust. This discovery brings self-torment and finally despair:

That love which made him all the world, is gone.
 Hating and hated now, he stands alone,
 An island point, measureless gulfs apart
 From other lives, from the old happiness
 Of being more than self, when heart to heart
 Gave all, yet grew the greater, not the less.

With the vanishing of love perishes all value. Life becomes
 a darkness, blind and utterly void
 Of any love or goodness: all deceit,
 This friendship and this God: all shams destroyed
 And truth seen now,
 Earth falls beneath his feet.¹¹

The discovery that the world and life are not what he thought them to be has various results for the "defeated youth." The immediate effect is a profound emotional shock: bereft of his illusions, the defeated youth sees all his values as illusions, and falls into the despairing conclusion that all life is utterly meaningless. But in thus denying value to human existence, the defeated youth does not give up the values themselves. Indeed, he clings to them with passionate conviction, finding it profoundly wrong that love and goodness are not manifest in human experience, and that there is no God. It is this emotional attachment to an unrealizable ideal that prevents the defeated youth

¹⁰"The Defeat of Youth," The Defeat of Youth, p. 12.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 5-15.

from viewing the world with anything like a cheerful cynicism. "Chained by his desires to dead carcasses," he must despair, or mock his own despair for its futility.

Mockery, then, is the second reaction of the defeated youth to his discovery of the "truth" about the world. It represents an intellectual awareness of the futility of weeping for that which is beyond help. But it is a bitter kind of mockery--the ridicule of one who laughs at himself and the world lest he weep.

This mockery may be seen at its lightest in such a poem as "Retrospect," in which Huxley, assuming the point of view of calm middle age, looks back upon his youth and sees himself as one who combined

comically the air
Of a tipsily priapic First Grave-Digger
With the hatred and remote disdain
Expressed by the Prince of Denmark's smile
For a world too sunk in its own flesh, too vile
To feel or understand the pain
Of doubting...doubting whether anything's worth while.¹²

This is amusing enough, but as most of Huxley's poems are full of "the pain of doubting," we may safely assume that Huxley's assurance in "Retrospect" is something desired rather than achieved.

More typical of Huxley's mockery are his bitter exposures of art and love as sources of value. In "A Picture by Goya," for example, he suggests that just as Goya can paint a robbery and murder and make it appear as elegant and beautiful as a pastoral scene, so we employ art to conceal the hideousness and brutality of our own existence.¹³ And music, which of all the arts has often been regarded as coming most near to expressing the blessedness that is reputed to lie at the heart of things,¹⁴ fares no better at Huxley's hands:

¹²"Retrospect," Wheels, a Second Cycle, ed. Edith Sitwell (Oxford, 1917), pp. 29-30.

¹³"Picture by Goya," The Cicadas and Other Poems (New York, 1931), pp. 8-9. First printed in Wheels, a Sixth Cycle, ed. Edith Sitwell (Oxford, 1921), pp. 8-9.

¹⁴Huxley himself so regards it. Cf. "Music at Night," Music at Night and Other Essays (New York, 1931), pp. 40-48.

Music, the revelation and the marvelous lie,
 Rebuilds in the minds of all a suave and curving
 Kingdom of Heaven, where the saxophone
 Affirms everlasting loves, the drums deny
 Death, and where great Tenorio, when he sings,
 Makes Picardy bloom with perfumed roses,
 And never a rotting corpse in all its earth.¹⁵

Music is just another mummery in the eternal theatre of varieties where man passes his silly and futile existence.

As regards love, Huxley, in the early poems, is generally sunk in that mood of mingled horror and despair which we have observed in "The Defeat of Youth"; but once in a while his intelligence intrudes to comment ironically on the facts of sex. In these poems Huxley's method is to juxtapose, with comic effect, the sentimental and the physical aspects of human existence. In "The Betrothal of Priapus," for example, the ironic contrasts begin with the title, Priapus being a symbol of procreation but not of betrothal. The poem itself is concerned with a young man who, on a hot afternoon, is engaged in desultory conversation with a young woman while trying to digest his dinner. His senses inflamed by the beauty of her neck and by the smell of her perfume, he would swoon with languor, were it not that, having drunk too much wine, he is continually belching. Finally, aware that here is Beauty before him, he bestirs himself:

Action, then action! Will you be my wife?¹⁶

In "Frascati's" the same method of burlesque is employed, all that is tender or sentimental in human relations being reduced to the level of a physical process. The scene of the poem is a cabaret, where amid the feeding of the "human bears," the "priapic revelry," and the steam of blood and kidney pie, two lovers sit

in blissful calm,
 Quietly sweating palm to palm.¹⁷

One might suppose that the intelligence would escape Huxley's mockery, since it is by means of his intelligence that Huxley became aware that his values were only emotional concepts without validity in the actual world. But intelligence, no more than art or love, escaped his mockery. Thus, Huxley comments in

¹⁵"Theatre of Varieties," The Cicadas, p. 4.

¹⁶Wheels, a Fourth Cycle, ed. Edith Sitwell (Oxford, 1919), pp. 17-18.

¹⁷Leda, p. 38.

the "First Philosopher's Song" that man, a physical degenerate from the ape, can rival him only in intelligence:

But oh, the sound of simian mirth!
Mind, issued from the monkey's womb,
Is still umbilical to earth,
Earth its home and earth its tomb.¹⁸

We are a part of brute creation in a brute universe, and even the mind, which, in perceiving this fact, rises above brutal nature, "is still umbilical to earth."

This kind of satire tends to approach the bitterness of "The Defeat of Youth." Indeed, no clear separation between Huxley's moods is possible: in most of the poems his intellectual and emotional responses are closely mingled, one now and then rising into prominence over the other. In the "Second Philosopher's Song," for example, it is wit which is uppermost:

If, O my Lesbia, I should commit
Not fornication, dear, but suicide,
My Thames-blown body (Pliny vouches it)
Would drift face upwards on the oily tide
With the other garbage, till it putrefied.

But you, if all your lovers' frozen hearts
Conspired to send you, desperate, to drown--
Your maiden modesty would float face down,
And men would weep upon your hinder parts.

'Tis the Lord's doing. Marvellous is the plan
By which this best of worlds is wisely planned.
One law He made for woman, one for man:
We bow the head and do not understand.¹⁹

But in the "Ninth Philosopher's Song," which is likewise witty, it is horror and despair that are predominant: most of us, says Huxley in this poem, seek escape from pain in hedonism or aesthetic experience or mysticism; but the poet, "too rational by half," can only stay where he is and try to laugh:

While happier mortals take to drink,
A dolorous dipsomaniac,
Fuddled with grief I sit and think,
Looking upon the bile when it is black.²⁰

For such a mood there is no hope but that of death; and in "Last Things" Huxley asks for that, praying that we be annihilated "with all our shame and all our folly, leaving no trace behind."²¹

All these poems, from "The Defeated Youth" to "Last Things," are, despite some differences in mood, the work of a

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

²¹ Ibid., p. 42.

"defeated youth." Huxley, it would seem, approached maturity with certain value standards (derived, one suspects because of Huxley's emphasis on art and love, from a romantic literary tradition) and with a belief that the universe outside man and man himself were actually governed by these standards. Experience--and it is important to note that Huxley came to maturity during the First World War²²--and Huxley's own reason taught him that the universe does not obviously obey any divine plan, and that men do not usually behave according to the highest standards of conduct; and perhaps, with maturity, Huxley discovered that he himself could not always reach the standards which he had set for himself. The result of these discoveries was a profound moral shock which manifested itself as a "sudden and violent reaction towards cynicism."²³ In the poems just considered this cynicism took the form of ironic juxtapositions between music and a rotting corpse, art and murder, love and belching and sweating; and Huxley's implication was that the ideal (symbolized by art and love) is only a cheap disguise for brutal fact and without real existence. In this procedure Huxley merely exchanged one absolute for another. Not finding the world wholly good as he wished it to be, he moved to the opposite extreme and declared it wholly bad. It was not enough for him that there are, after all, music and art in addition to death and rapine, and that man is angel as well as ape. Huxley would have all or nothing.

Now this denial of value to the world and to human existence, as has been noted, is a kind of affirmation of the values themselves. The juxtaposition of art and death and love and lust is horrible only when these are regarded as separate and morally opposed entities. And they can be so regarded only if there is some standard of values. Huxley has such a standard, but it is an emotional standard that his skeptical intelligence rejects.

It is this conflict between reason and passion that would seem to force Huxley to try to do something about his situation--to adopt a point of view toward experience that would permit a more positive attitude toward value and yet not repudiate anything

²² Huxley was born in 1894.

²³ Aldous Huxley, "Uncle Spencer," Little Mexican (London, 1929), p. 123. Huxley applies this phrase to a fictional character, but it describes his own reactions very well.

he knows to be true of the universe. If he could arrive at such a point of view, then both his intelligence and his emotions would be satisfied, and the painful dualism that we have been exploring would be at an end.

The method which Huxley employed in the early poems to resolve his conflicts is essentially the method which he was to explore in all his later works. His first step was to suggest that the universe, to an undetermined extent, is an object of our own creation. If this is the case, then he could, within some undefined limits, create the kind of universe he wanted--one in which values have a real existence.

This doctrine of a subjective is hinted at rather than expressly set forth in the early poems; but certainly the following poem is an expression of the metaphysic just outlined:

Two Realities

A waggon passed with scarlet wheels
 And a yellow body, shining new.
 "Splendid!" I said. "How fine it feels
 To be alive, when beauty peels
 The grimy husk from life." And you
 Said, "Splendid!" and I thought you'd seen
 That waggon blazing down the street;
 But I looked and saw that your gaze had been
 On a child that was kicking an obscene
 Brown ordure with his feet.

Our souls are elephants, thought I,
 Remote behind a prisoning grill,
 With trunks thrust out to peer and pry
 And pounce upon reality;
 And each at his own sweet will

Seizes the bun that he likes best
 And passes over all the rest.²⁴

What the universe is in itself, this poem implies, we finite mortals can never discover; our world is only an arbitrary selection from ultimate total reality. It is also a limited selection, for, as we are confined by "a prisoning grill," our choice is not wholly free. Hence we cannot, presumably, select a world that wholly satisfies the heart's desire. Pain and death, for example, are actualities that are hard to eliminate by "right thinking." But our world, nevertheless, is in a measure subjective, and to that extent it is a world in which values may be as real as the material facts of existence. The problem of the good

²⁴The Burning Wheel, p. 16.

life, then, is really a problem in right thinking. If we live aimless and futile lives, it is because, for some reason, we prefer to do so; and when we find such existences unendurable, then we have merely to recognize the reality of ultimate values and live our lives in accordance with them. The theory is amazingly simple.

The practice of this theory, however, cannot be easy, for if it were, then Huxley should have settled his problems on the spot. Since he continued to struggle with the same problems long after the writing of the early poems, it is clear that making this method work is not easy. An added difficulty is that Huxley, at least in this stage of his career, was not really sure that our universe is a subjective one. Much of the time he wrote as though the universe were actually behemoth and that value consequently were only a kind of fiction. He constantly wavered between two points of view, at one moment denying with sardonic despair the possibility of living the good life, and at the next moment arguing that the world is behemoth only because we choose to regard it as such.

But this indecision is a matter for future investigation; the problem of the moment is to discover in what manner Huxley proposes to realize the good life, having implied in "the Two Realities" that this is possible.

The good life as Huxley conceived it seems to exist on two levels--the human and the supra-human--which, however, are not always to be clearly distinguished from each other. Attaining the first involves some kind of integration of man's conflicting impulses--the creation of beauty within the gross world of fact by the patterning of experience. Attaining the second involves rejecting all the physical aspects of existence and identifying oneself with something like Beauty itself. Living the good life on the human level means accepting the world of fact and creating within it and out of its materials a world of value; living the good life on the supra-human level means transcending the world of fact--that is, denying one's animal nature to live as an angel. Let us consider what Huxley has to say of each of these proposals.

The first is set forth in a long prose-poem entitled "Beauty." In this work Huxley accepts the physical universe, "where all is ugly, eaten into by the syphilis of time"; he also

accepts the fact that man is both ape and angel. His problem is to discover the best possible existence that these conditions allow. This ideal existence is the highest beauty and consequently the highest good. He arrives at a definition of this supreme beauty by considering, in turn, the lesser forms of beauty (or modes of existence), which are necessary elements in the good life. The search for Anadyomene--"perpetual miracle, beauty endlessly born"--takes the poet first to Troy, where he finds Helen and Cressid, symbols of sexual love. But Troy, though it is part of the poet's blood and "the remembrance of it is a fire that sticks and tears when I would pull it off"--Troy is not the goal:

When I have learnt the truth, I will return and build a new palace with domes less ominously like breasts, and there I will invent a safer Helen and a less paradoxical Cressid, and my harem will be a library for enlightenment.

Continuing his search, the poet passes quickly through the realms of the spirit and the reason, symbolized respectively by the church-like beauty of nature and by the ordered beauty of geometry. Next he contemplates the beauty of darkness and sleep--the refusal to perceive that all is ugly and that death is the goal of all existence. This, he confesses, is a tempting realm, but it too is rejected: "desperate, my mind has desired it: never my blood, whose pulse is a rhythm of the world." The opposite kind of beauty is also rejected: "Beatrice lacks solidity, is as unresponsive to your kisses as mathematics"; she is an oubliette that, shooting "you upwards into light," is only another form of death.

What, then, [Huxley asks himself] is the common measure? To take the world as it is, but metaphorically, informing the chaos of eternity with a soul, qualifying transience with eternity.

When flowers are thoughts, and lonely poplars fountains of aspiring longing; when our actions are the poem of which all geographies and architecture and every science and all the unclassified individual odds and ends are the words, when even Helen's white voluptuousness matches some candour of the soul--then it will have been found, the permanent and living loveliness.

It is not a far-fetched, dear-bought gem; no pomader to be smelt only when the crowd becomes too stinkingly insistent; it is . . . not a thing richly apart, but an ethic, a way of belief and of practice, of faith and works, medieval in its implication with the very threads of life. I desire no Paphian cloister of pink monks. Rather a rosy Brotherhood of Common Life, eating, drinking; marrying and giving in marriage, taking and taken in adultery; reading, thinking, and when thinking fails, feeling immeasurably more subtly, sometimes perhaps creating.

Arduous search for one who is chained by his desire to

dead carcasses, whose eyes are dimmed with tears by the slow heart-breaking twilights full of old family ghosts laid in lavender, whose despair cries out for opiate and anodyne, craving gross sleep or a place on the airy unsupported pinacles which hang in the sterile upper chambers of ether.

Ventre à terre, head in air--your centaurs are your only poets. Their hoofs strike sparks from the flints and they see both very near and immensely far.²⁵

The selection of an aesthetic philosophy of life as the mode of salvation; the admission by the poet that he has been "chained by his desires to dead carcasses" and that his "eyes are dimmed with tears by the slow heart-breaking twilights full of old family ghosts laid in lavender"; the very language of this confession--all these strongly suggest the defeated youth--the disappointed romantic who cannot endure the shock of reality. But what is the meaning of this proposal? How does one "inform the chaos of eternity with a soul" and qualify "transience with eternity"?

Presumably this "soul" and this "eternity" are only names for formal perfection, which is the principle of beauty. But this beauty is not the same as the beauty of art, for it is the result, not of selection and ordering, but of the quantitative balancing of elements of personality and of modes of activity, primacy being denied to any one of the human faculties. In the rosy Brotherhood of Common Life there is only eating and drinking and marrying and thinking, "and when thinking fails, feeling . . . subtly"--a series of discontinuous activities succeeding each other in time and of equal importance. This is not the unity of the fine arts; it is a kind of wholeness, but it is not aesthetic harmony or real psychological integration.

One may also note that this "beauty" provides no standard of evaluating the elements which compose the whole. Good and evil, in this philosophy, are hardly more than quantitative differences, fullness of existence being the only criterion of value. Cruelty and stupidity, for example, are not vices, but the necessary complements, respectively, of kindness and intelligence; and there is really no choice between them, since both are manifestations of human character.

Huxley gives no clear sign in the early poems that he was aware of these limitations in his philosophy; indeed, as this doc-

²⁵Leda, pp. 45-54.

trine of wholeness is to reappear in later works--most notably in Point Counter Point and Do What You Will--we may assume that it is one of his cherished theories. Nevertheless, it is not something to which he gave his whole allegiance, for he suggests in a number of the early poems that the ideal existence is something other than the rosy Brotherhood of Common Life that he hymns in "Beauty."

In "The Defeat of Youth," for example, the quest of the poet would seem to be for some more rarefied existence than that of the rosy Brotherhood. There is, to be sure, the passage already quoted²⁶ in which Huxley speaks of soul as "wrought / Of one stuff with the body" and of truth as springing "From the dear bosom of the material earth." But there is a difference here. This material earth is not the material earth of drinking and marrying and taking in adultery; it is, rather, an earth that is so closely integrated with mind and spirit as to be almost indistinguishable from them. In this kind of integration love, for example, is untinged by lust:

Thus to hold and keep
And comfort her distracted, lull her to sleep
And gently kiss her brow and hair and eyes
Seems love perfected--templed high and white
Against the calm of golden autumn skies,
And shining quenchlessly with vestal light.²⁷

Obviously, despite certain similarities in language between the two poems, the ideal in "The Defeat of Youth" is not a complete and joyous acceptance of all aspects of human existence, but a kind of spiritualizing of the physical side of man.

The same is true of "The Reef," in which the poet, become as aimless and inhuman as the idiot fishes of his aquarium, seeks a new level of existence, a reef where

the body shall be
Quick as the mind; and will shall find release
From bondage to brute things; and joyously
Soul, will and body, in the strength of triune peace,
Shall live the perfect grace of power unwasted.
And love consummate, marvellously blending
Passion and reverence
.....

²⁶Supra, p. 7.

²⁷"The Defeat of Youth," The Defeat of Youth, p. 11.

shall crown.²⁸

The new life with its ageless starry fire.²⁸

Although the language of this fragment suggests something of the wholeness of the rosy Brotherhood, the desire to "find release from bondage to brute things" tells us that the integration desired here is not an integration on the human level, but on some vaguely higher plane of existence. Brute things are not accepted as a part of life to be fitted into a pattern of living, but as a base metal to be turned into gold by some kind of spiritual alchemy.

In such a poem as "Stanzas" it is unmistakably clear that what the poet is seeking is not a well-rounded life on the human plane but an idealized existence on a supra-human level. Complaining that thought is a net binding the mind, that words are fetters for the spirit, and that action bears us headlong and unseeing past the fabulous beauties of the world--past the "slow curves of a girl's breast," the "hanging flowers exquisitely wrought in airy metal," the distant hills like "the shoulders of a goddess," and the "arrowy trees piercing the spirit deeply with delight"--the poet longs for this consummation:

Would that I might make these miracles my own!
Like a pure angel, thinking colour and form,
Hardening to rage in a flame of chiseled stone,
Spilling my love like sunlight, golden and warm
On noonday flowers, speaking the song of birds
Among the branches, whispering the fall of rain,
Beyond all thought, past action and past words,
I would live in beauty, free from self and pain.²⁹

To become a pure angel thinking colour and form, not merely enjoying it with one's senses, is to leave the mundane world below in an imaginative identification with Beauty--a consummation that can take place only on the "airy unsupported pinnacles which hang in the sterile upper chambers of ether." The poet wishes, not so much to create beauty as to have his being in Beauty, which is to live on a divine rather than human level of existence.

It is hardly necessary to quote any more passages to verify this point, but one may note the general pattern of all those poems in which Huxley seeks this imaginative identification with Beauty. There is, in all of them, a world of fact from which

²⁸The Defeat of Youth, p. 18.

²⁹Ibid., p. 42.

the poet wishes to escape. It is a "fevered land of stones and fire,"³⁰ "a world of drought and dust and stone,"³¹ a place where the will is in "bondage to brute things,"³² where "matter" is a "prison,"³³ a world of laughter, weeping, and foiled violences,³⁴ and of "self and pain."³⁵ There is, likewise, a world of value to which the poet would escape. It is "a life at rest in perfect beauty";³⁶ it is perceived by none but "blind eyes";³⁷ it is even more beautiful than the vision of a blind poet;³⁸ there, in a passion of "color and pure wings,"³⁹ the poet would live among things that "are all colour and fire like a star,"⁴⁰ himself "thinking colour and form."⁴¹

What we have in these poems, it would seem, is a desire of a frustrated romantic to recapture his lost illusions by transcending the physical limits of existence.

³⁰"The Defeat of Youth," ibid., p. 14.

³¹"Italy," ibid., p. 25. ³²"The Reef," ibid., p. 18.

³³"Italy," ibid., p. 25. ³⁴"The Reef," ibid., p. 18.

³⁵"Stanzas," ibid., p. 41.

³⁶"The Defeat of Youth," ibid., p. 14.

³⁷"The Reef," ibid., p. 18. ³⁸"Italy," ibid., p. 25.

³⁹"The Reef," ibid., p. 18. ⁴⁰"Italy," ibid., p. 25.

⁴¹"Stanzas," ibid., p. 41.

